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ABSTRACT

An operational seminar is an in-the-field demonstration for those involved in the process of change that all community development projects require. It does not require previous theoretical exposure of any kind. On the basis of the analysis of a specific milieu, the seminar participants put together a program of activities, choosing appropriate methods, techniques, and educational procedures. The exposure and experience acquired in the field during the 3 weeks of the seminar enable the participants to define the basic principles that underlie educational and training activities for development and determine how to apply them. The phases of the methodological approach include: (1) a survey of the milieu, including identification of problems at the development project level, determination of learner profiles, and determination of educational levels; (2) planning the educational and training program, including the choice of themes for the educational action, elaboration of the action program, and preparation of instructors; and (3) experimentation with and evaluation of the education and training program. The operational seminar is designed for high- or intermediate-level development organization officials. All participants are divided into multidisciplinary teams on the first day, and each team is assigned to an action area that will serve as a framework for the problem to be solved. The final report of a seminar relates how each team performed, the reasons that actions were taken, and the results of actions. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The operational seminar: a training method to foster development

by Marcel de Clerck

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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WHAT IS AN OPERATIONAL SEMINAR?

The training of staff in charge of designing and implementing development-related educational activities, in particular functional literacy programmes, is without a doubt a key factor to the success of such activities. These persons must be able to plan an instructional/training programme, to carry it out and to evaluate its functioning and its results. Thus their training should combine knowledge acquisition with acquisition of skills. Moreover, this training can only be short-term, between two and three weeks, because of the very pressing responsibilities which these persons must assume, especially in developing countries.

The operational seminar takes these two necessities into account.

Yet, just what is an operational seminar? What does it involve? Very generally speaking, it can be said that an operational seminar is a training or refresher course aimed at officials, specialists, technicians and trainers who, in some way or other, are involved in the process of change which all community-level development schemes require.

The operational seminar can be defined as a methodological course enabling participants to experience, in condensed fashion but using real situations, the sequence and chain of actions the sum total of which constitutes a logical, coherent educational and training programme for development. What is involved, therefore, is not the one-sided, verbal transmission of concepts or processes via reports, lectures and site visits, but in-the-field activities, in an actual situation.

The operational seminar can also be defined as the demonstration of a method. As a method demonstration technique it has been used successfully for the

The programme of most operational seminars is composed of three successive phases, each of which includes a certain number of operations which could be thought of as variants reflecting both the diversity of local situations and the plurality of development training approaches:

- *The study of the milieu includes:*
  - *identification of problems at the level of the development scheme,*
  - *determination of learner profiles,*
  - *determination of levels of education;*
- *The elaboration of the educational and training programme with:*
  - *choice of themes related to educational activities,*
  - *planning of the action programme,*
  - *preparation of instructors entrusted to carry out the programme;*
- *Experimentation and evaluation of the educational and training programme.*

dissemination of literacy for development in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The objectives of such a seminar can be described as follows:

- how to translate a given development goal into educational or training terms;
- how to plan and organize educational activities which correspond to the needs and expectations of adults, on the basis of a given situation;
- how to evaluate the different factors affecting the learning processes.

It is because it is both a research – action activity and a method demonstration procedure that the operational seminar has proven to be a training tool of unquestionable value. It offers an alternative to the didacticism which too often is borrowed from the classroom model by training programmes. The operational seminar does not involve previous theoretical exposure of any kind, nor any *a priori* definition of basic principles. On the basis of the investigational analysis of a specific milieu – living and real – the participants put together a programme of activities, choosing appropriate methods, techniques and educational procedures in terms of the needs and expectations of local

populations, their social and cultural particularities. It is on the basis of the exposure and experience acquired in the field during the three weeks of the seminar that they will define the basic principles which underlie educational and training activities for development and determine how to apply them.

This intensive training method, defined by the Unesco Secretariat, was applied and implemented for the first with the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), during international seminars organized in 1970-1971 in Tunisia, Mexico and the Sudan. It provided training in a rapid, economical and effective manner for thousands of technicians, not only for literacy work but also for post-literacy work, before being applied to other areas of education.

EXPERIMENTAL WORLD LITERACY PROGRAMME

In September 1965, a World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, held in Teheran, discussed at length the concept of functional literacy, took a position in favour of its promotion, and decided the main directions of the programme envisaged by Unesco, in particular for the eight experimental projects which were to be financed by the United Nations Special Fund.

United Nations system organizations co-operated with around twenty Member States in putting together new literacy strategies and methods within the framework of the EWLP, which was carried out between 1967 and 1973. Apart from Unesco, the United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP) provided the greatest share of outside funding, and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), were also involved in the EWLP. The FAO was the executing body for two of these projects; experts from other agencies co-operated in the implementation of projects under the aegis of Unesco. Representatives from various agencies met on several occasions to deal with the conceptual aspects and techniques of literacy. Moreover, some projects were financed with bilateral funds, one of them by the very country concerned. Thus, the EWLP represents an undertaking in which international co-operation provided the means for innovative, vigorous action.

PHASE I: SURVEY OF THE MILIEU

Operation No. 1: Identification of problems at the development project level

A survey of the milieu begins with an analysis of the programmes related to the development action concerned and the identification of problem situations which, according to those in charge and technicians, could hamper the smooth execution of the programme. Depending on the situation, these problems can be socio-cultural, economic or technical in nature.

For example, problems identified within the framework of the Operations Seminar (OS) of Gezirah Scheme (Sudan) included:

- **economic problems**
  - *lack of seasonal manpower for the cotton harvest;*
  - *time loss in the cotton harvest;*
  - *poor functioning of retailing co-operatives;*
  - *defaulting on loans taken out by farmers.*
- **technical problems**
  - *low educational level, hindering access to pertinent technical documentation;*
  - *non-application by farmers of technical instructions;*
  - *inadequate cultural practices (for example, the ideal moment to harvest cotton, how to clean and stock it).*
- **socio-cultural problems**
  - *fatalism on the part of farmers;*
  - *negative attitudes towards manual work;*
  - *negative attitude towards female work;*
  - *economically unproductive expenditures for weddings or births, dictated by traditions.*

Operation No. 2: Determination of learner profiles

Next, it must be determined how the community directly concerned by development activities perceives the objectives and programmes of the development scheme. What is its members' attitude towards the changes proposed? What explains the problem situation encountered by those in charge of the project? Why do these projects run into difficulties when carried out in the field?

It is wise to focus the study of the milieu on elements related to educative involvement. These elements are:

- knowledge of the individuals: what they effectively know, and what they should know but do not;
- skills persons should have: the abilities they need to acquire to participate in the development programme and ensure its success;
- attitudes: that which individuals are predisposed to do or accept, or, conversely, what they will not do or accept;
- incentives: motives which drive individuals to act in the way they do, as well as motives which might incite them to act in a way more consistent with the demands of development.

Operation No. 3: Determination of educational levels

The level of all training activity is set in terms of the initial level of education of individuals for whom the activity is intended. At this point in the methodological circuit, an answer needs to be found to this basic question, namely, what is the learners' real level of education? Are they totally illiterate? If this is not the case, what is their level in reading, writing and arithmetic? Are they capable of understanding technical texts contained in booklets designed for lay readers and distributed by development bodies for their benefit? Are they able to carry out the arithmetic operations required for

the application of a given new technique, for example, the management of village co-operatives, the judicious use of fertilizers or pesticides?

PHASE II: PLANNING THE EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING PROGRAMME

Operation No. 1: Choice of themes for the educational action

At present, what needs to be done is to choose, from among the problem situations uncovered by the survey of the milieu, the themes for the execution of the programme which will be carried out in the course of the seminar. This choice should be made in consultation, depending on the individual case, with the staff of the technical services responsible or with technicians of the development scheme and – this point is essential – with the participation of the population concerned, including their involvement in the organization and management of the educational process. The choice is guided by certain criteria. Normally, the application themes selected are those problems which require educational and training action, problems which correspond to the priority objectives of national and regional development programmes, those which are current and, lastly, those which can be dealt with by the beneficiaries themselves.

Operation No. 2: Elaboration of the action programme

The objectives of the education and training programme are defined according to the problems selected as application themes, what beneficiaries need to learn in order to be able to understand them and effectively solve them. In other words, the problems which affect community members are translated into operational educational and training goals. These con-

tents in turn determine the educational methods and techniques required. Depending on the situation, this will imply the launching of literacy training classes or workshops, group discussions, activities sessions, demonstration techniques or, in cases in which the beneficiaries sufficiently master reading and writing, self-teaching methods. Participants must then prepare teaching materials which will be used by instructors in an activities session, a literacy training sequence or an in-the-field practical demonstration, as well as teaching materials aimed at learners, whether they be illiterates, semi-literates or literates.

Examples of problem situations chosen as objectives of educational action:

O.S of Gezirah (Sudan)

- *economic importance of the participation of women in the cotton harvest;*
- *application of cultural techniques and processes recommended for harvesting, cleaning and baling cotton.*

O.S. in Paraguay

- *acquisition of basic facts about leishmaniasis, a serious endemic illness in forested areas (in which the O.S. was taking place);*
- *adoption of preventive measures against insect vectors of this illness.*

O.S. in Chad

- *initiation to operations related to the functioning of a self-managed market: cotton weighing, knowledge of weights and the use of a scale, reading and writing of price schedules.*

O.S. in the Philippines

- *enabling all men and women in the community to acquire basic skills of judgement which will help them make fully-informed decisions with regard to family planning.*

O.S. in Togo

- *development of food-crop production, in particular improvement of corn and gumbo yields using local varieties, thanks to the introduction of new agricultural techniques.*

Operation No. 3: Preparation of instructors who will be entrusted with the implementation of the educational and training programme for development.
This programme will have value only if it can be implemented by staff operating in the field – instructors, monitors, facilitators and literacy workers. The purpose is to see whether the method elaborated by the participants in the operational seminar is within the grasp of these persons. Does the method really take into account their level of competence both educationally and technically? Experience has shown that to implement a programme which in terms of its design, content and form differs from traditional programmes, instructors need to be properly prepared.

Actual experience in the field shows that teaching staffs represent a broad and varied spectrum of persons. To give just a few examples, they will consist of seasoned instructors with a solid background of teaching experience, but ignorant of the technical and professional aspects of the instruction to be provided; villagers, motivated by a desire to help out, able to communicate easily with their peers (the other villagers) but sharing their ignorance and prejudices in the sphere of agriculture; technicians who have the requisite knowledge and skills, but experience difficulties in communicating with adult learners.

PHASE III: EXPERIMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMME

In an operational seminar, experimentation is limited to the educational methods, techniques and tools used. The goal sought is to evaluate to what extent these methods, techniques and tools have been appropriate, effective vehicles for transmitting programme contents; to evaluate the extent to which instructors have been able to master the procedures they employed; and lastly, to evaluate the extent to which the educa-

tional action was adapted to the needs and expectations of adult illiterates or adults possessing a limited level of education.

O.S. PARAGUAY

The baseline study carried out in the village of Guayaybi showed that more than 65% of the sample population involved in the survey were infected with leishmaniasis. Most of these individuals had no knowledge of the cause of this dangerous disease nor of the indispensable preventative measures. The objectives and contents of the educational action had been defined in terms of the problem of leishmaniasis as present in the village. Participants in the seminar, among whom were physicians and nurses, prepared a technical text designed for instructors conducting the required technical information session, a teaching text for the implementation of activities, a poster showing the phases of evolution of leishmaniasis and, for the benefit of auditors, two reading texts, a sort of condensed technical text, one of which was adapted to the reading level of illiterates, and the other, to the level of semi-literates. Moreover, participants worked out evaluation tools – a pre-test and post-test – which were completely identical and were used to measure the extent to which educators, by the end of the session, had attained the objectives of the exercise.

To this end, the test, which covered essential concepts presented in the course of the session, was administered to each of the villagers before and after the session. The average obtained on the basis of the pre-test concerning the participants' knowledge with regard to leishmaniasis was 5.1 out of 10; the average on the post-test was 6.1 out of 10, hence an improvement of 1 point. Analysis of the results of the ten items contained in the test revealed significant gains, however. Accordingly, following the session, 72% of the attendees were able to identify leishmaniasis as opposed to 24% before the session. Nearly 60% of attendees in the pre-test attributed the cause of the disease to a local plant. This figure was only 15% after the session. Concerning the identification of the insect vectors, 84% of attendees provided a correct response on the post-test compared to 53% before the session. The low average score is explained by the fact that the educational action aimed to substitute new knowledge for the traditional beliefs which the majority of the village's inhabitants shared.

The operational seminar, as a method of development training, is designed in fact for high or intermediate level development organization officials. It requires the participation of persons responsible for the content of development schemes – those who define what needs to be done in order to attain the objectives set, as well as the collaboration of those responsible for the dissemination and implementation of these programmes among the populations concerned.

In an agricultural development scheme, one will find agronomists, agricultural technicians and persons involved in teaching agricultural techniques to lay people; if the programme is health-related, doctors, health education workers and administrators will participate; the collaboration of social science specialists is very desirable; and of course, there will be adult educators – planners, producers of teaching materials, trainers and methodologists.

All participants in the operational seminar are divided into multidisciplinary teams on the first day. Each team is comprised of educators, development technicians and specialists in the social sciences. Each team is assigned by lot to an action area, usually the rural community which will serve as the framework for its activities; in this way, the team will be confronted with real-life problems of the field.

Whereas the classical seminar is characterized by the oral exchange of reports and experiences related to environments or situations which are often unfamiliar to the majority of participants, in an operational seminar, knowledge is exchanged related to a genuine, immediate problem, in an environment and situation familiar to all team members. A solution must be found for a certain problem. How? Knowledge alone is not sufficient. Exchanges of views among members of a given team will also deal with the skills and concrete means of effectively solving this common problem. It is here that the multidisciplinary approach proves to be particularly productive. In this way, educators and development technicians, by participating in the seminar, have an opportunity to see how social scientists devise the tools for a study of the milieu and diagnose a problem situation. In this way specialists in the social sciences collaborate with development technicians in planning education and training programmes and in producing teaching materials, and participate in experimenting with them and evaluating them. In this way also, educators and specialists in the social sciences teach development technicians the strategy and mechanisms of development action, as well as the obstacles which, at the level of the population, hinder this action. Committed to a common task, educators, development technicians and social science specialists work hand-in-hand, and complement each other professionally in striving towards their common goal. An operational seminar not only aims at the self-teaching of participants – doing is learning – but also the inter-training of participants, thanks to mutual interaction between team members, in which each member benefits from the experience of others on the team.

Unlike the report of a classic type seminar which provides a summary of what was said and discussed during the meeting, the final report of an operational seminar relates in an objective, anonymous manner how each team performed, the reasons for which a given measure was taken, the logic underlying the plan of activities, and the positive or negative resuts obtained in the implementation of the training programme at the local community level. It is a document which is both descriptive and analytical, comprising all team reports, samples of the teaching materials produced, and the final assessments and methodological reflections they inspire. In fact, it is a sort of practical handbook or guide to be used not only for subsequent self-teaching by participants, but also as a means of disseminating the lessons to be learned from the operational seminar on a broader scale.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the operational seminar appears to be the ideal instrument for finding alternatives to the various kinds of education and training development, or at least, to the forms in which they have been implemented until now. The operational seminar approach has transcended the sphere of literacy work and is now applied to other aspects of education, for example the training or refresher education of teaching personnel, the planning of teaching materials, village school reform and its creative role in an illiterate context, etc.

The operational seminar operates at the grass-roots level, is intimately tied to reality, translates and interprets, with regard to training and education for development, the ever-changing needs of a rapidly evolving world.

An advisory committee comprising top-level officials and specialists in the fields of education and socio-economic development, as well as representatives of ALECSO, the Arab Organization of Literacy and Adult Education (ARLO) and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) would be constituted. This advisory committee would meet annually.

The management of the Programme at the regional level falls within the framework of the activities of Unesco Regional Office for Education in the Arab States (UNEDBAS). However, the volume of work required for the implementation of such a programme necessitates the creation of a specialized unit to carry out the task. It was proposed that a technical unit, fully equipped in terms of human and material resources, should be set up within UNEDBAS to be responsible for the programme. UNEDBAS, in collaboration with Unesco Secretariat and its specialized bureaus and institutes, will provide technical support.

It is obvious that the programme should coordinate its efforts within the framework of existing structures. This involves ALECSO/ARLO and ABEGS, educational research centres operating in the Arab Region, and particularly the Educational Innovation Programme for Development in the Arab States (EIPDAS). Arab organizations concerned with education, culture, communication and labour have a prominent role to play in the execution of the regional programme by virtue of their rich experiences and potentialities. Special mention should be made of ALECSO's efforts in the formulation of Arab strategies and plans as well as studies and documentation on the various types of assistance and support given to the Arab Member States. These organizations would develop a work plan for their contribution to the programme.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Abdelwahid Abdalla Yousif to the cause of Literacy. Mr Yousif is a regional adviser in primary education and Literacy in Unesco's Regional Office for Education in the Arab States (UNEDBAS).

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